Move Your Transcription Business From Tape to Digital

A How-To Guide From My Docs Online

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Introduction

Moving your transcription service from tape to digital audio file processing can be an important step in the development of your business. There are many benefits that can be gained by making the shift to digital but there is a lot to understand before you can make the change. Some of the changes may seem daunting at first but with the proper information the change can be made fairly easily. We hope that this guide will be a useful tool for you in your shift to digital audio file processing.

Section One – Why make the change?

There are a number of benefits of digital audio dictation technology compared to older tape technology. Those benefits include the ability to streamline work processes, eliminate tape pickup or mailing, and better quality audio, which itself improves and speeds transcription.

Digital audio also means the transcriptionist need not be physically present in the doctor's office, or even in the same community. This leads to time and travel savings, and allows the transcriptionist to work from virtually anywhere a PC can be connected to the internet.

This guide covers the essential technology knowledge the MT needs to be able to make the transition to digital, and to be able to assist their medical clients in making the same transition.

The guide covers what hardware, software, and connectivity the doctor and transcriptionist need, the steps involved in digital transcription workflow, handheld products, software, file types, and accessories, and HIPAA and other privacy and security issues and methods.

Section Two - What the Medical Professional Needs

The shift to digital requires changes on the part of both your doctors or medical professionals and the transcriptionist. This section will cover what is required on the medical professional side and the next section will cover what is required on the transcriptionist side.

The doctor or other medical professional and support staff will need one or more handheld digital dictation devices (most commonly one manufactured by Olympus), the associated PC software (provided by the handheld manufacturer) to transfer the files from the handheld to the PC, and a USB cable connection which is usually with a device cradle, to connect the handheld to the PC.

One PC in the office can support one or more doctors, each with their own handheld.

The office will need an internet connection, preferably broadband for speed and convenience.

Although the exact device model is typically not important to the transcriptionist and the post-dictation process, the model chosen may be important to the doctor, based on desired features, including size, weight, ergonomic characteristics, storage capacity, battery life, as well as extra features such as use as an MP3 player.

Each doctor's device must be connected to the PC briefly to transfer the files from the device to the PC, from which point they can be transferred to a medical transcriptionist using the broadband Internet connection. For more information please see "Steps Involved in the Digital Transcription Workflow".

What Doctors Need: the Short Answer

- Handheld dictation device of choice (usually Olympus)
- An Internet-connected PC equipped with USB connection for the handheld
- Software that came with the handheld to transfer handheld files to the PC
- An internet file delivery service that is HIPAA compliant

Section Three - What the Medical Transcriptionist Needs

A medical transcriptionist of course needs a personal computer with Internet connectivity and word processing software. The speed and power of the MT's PC should be based more on what is needed to effectively and efficiently do the actual transcription, rather than internet connectivity. A PC with multiple USB ports (most recent computers include multiple USB ports) will allow the use of a wide variety of add-on hardware such as foot pedals.

Virtually all PCs have audio jacks for connecting headphones using a standard plug. Most desktop computers have the audio jack on the back while notebook computers normally have headphone jack on the side. To be used for transcription purposes the PC must have an audio output, or headphone jack.

The majority of medical transcriptionists use Windows based computers. Relatively few MTs use Macs.

The MT will need software to play back digital audio files. Software for playback is typically bundled with handheld dictation devices, ensuring support for a particular device's file type. Third party software products that handle all required file types are also available (see *Digital Dictation Products Guide, Software, and File Types*).

MTs who also work directly with the medical professionals who are using handheld devices can benefit from having a similar device, in order to be able to consult with and support their customers.

A transcription-oriented Internet file storage and delivery service is required to allow files to be securely transmitted and organized as well as to deliver audio files to the transcriptionist and finished documents to the medical professional. When selecting a service be certain that the service is HIPAA compliant.

The preferred internet connection for a medical transcriptionist is broadband (cable modem or DSL). Benefits include speed and convenience ("always on"). Broadband can be expensive compared to dialup, but the productivity improvement it brings usually makes the extra cost worth it. Broadband is not universally available.

If broadband is not available, dialup service can be used if the file transfer methods allow files to be transferred efficiently and in

"batches", and if your work flow allows you to be online only periodically.

Satellite internet service, often more expensive than regular broadband but not as fast, convenient, or reliable, has the advantage of being available virtually anywhere. Given the technical challenges of file transfers over satellite internet, try to use dialup-friendly file transfer methods when possible.

Newer mobile connectivity options based on cellular technology are also available, and will likely provide additional options in the future, so watch for new data offerings from your cell phone company.

What MTs Need: the Short Answer

- A PC with USB ports
- Playback software, headphones and pedal
- Word processing software
- A HIPAA compliant Internet file delivery service
- Internet connectivity (broadband preferred)

Section Four – The Steps Involved In Digital Transcription Workflow

To better understand how the dictation moves from the Doctor to the Transcriptionist and back we've put together the following step by step example of how the workflow normally works.

1. The medical professional dictates into handheld device. Each snippet of dictation is usually for an individual patient visit and is automatically saved as an individual file. File sizes vary

depending on length of transcription, but are usually fairly small (usually ranging from 100 to 500 kilobytes in size).

2. The handheld device is connected to a PC to transfer the dictation voice files to the PC. There may be a dock, or just a cable to plug into the handheld device, but in most cases it will use a standard USB cable connection to the PC.

3. When the handheld is connected via USB the handheld's program, already installed on the PC, automatically moves the audio files to a folder on the PC and removes them from the handheld dictation device, which can then be disconnected. If you find that the audio files are not removed from the handheld dictation device then check the device instruction manual for settings on copying voice files to a PC

4. The files are moved from the PC to an Internet server using a variety of standard connection methods (web, ftp, WebDAV or custom).

5. The transcriptionist located elsewhere downloads the voice files from the internet server to his or her PC.

6. The transcriptionist uses software and hardware to play the voice files (probably including a pedal to control playback) and transcribes the audio file to a word processing document.

7. The MT uploads the finished document to the internet server for delivery to the medical practice, or perhaps for review and editing by a quality assurance editor. Most transcribed medical word processing files are less than 100 kilobytes in size.

8. The medical practice downloads the finished document to their PC for printing, electronic filing, or both.

Section Five - Digital Dictation Products Guide: Voice Recorders, Software, File Types, and Foot Controls

Digital audio recording has largely replaced tape for audio recording and transcription purposes for a number of reasons, including:

- Easier to use, with no tapes to turn over or switch
- Longer recording times
- Easily transmitted via the Internet, allowing transcription to occur remotely
- Easy to archive on a PC
- Higher overall audio quality, making transcription faster and more efficient.

The key to the success of digital audio is the handheld dictation unit – small, handheld, battery-powered devices that are available from a number of manufacturers. The dominant manufacturer of handheld dictation devices today is Olympus, which makes a wide variety of devices which all provide similar quality and ease of use.

Other notable manufacturers include Sony and Philips.

The specific model of handheld is usually irrelevant to the transcriptionist, as the files and their delivery and playback method are usually the same regardless of what model handheld is used from a particular manufacturer.

In addition to the handheld unit, two other things are needed to get the audio files into a PC for distribution. The first is a USB connection between the handheld device and the PC, often using a "cradle" for the handheld in addition to a USB cable. The second is software provided by the handheld manufacturer to automate the transfer to the PC.

The Olympus software, for example, is called DSS Player, and it can also be used to play back the files for transcription, either on the connected PC or on another, remote PC after electronic delivery of the files. Olympus makes a version of this software available for free from their website. You can find the location for the download in the Useful Links section.

Sony offers software called "Digital Voice Editor" and Philips offers a product called "SpeechExec".

Digital Dictation File Types

PC files have a "file extension" that identifies the file type, and what program to use to open the file. The most common file type for digital audio recording is DSS (Digital Speech Standard) used by Olympus and Philips recorders.

Other file types that may be used or supported include WAV, WMA, and MP3.

The software that comes with the handheld device will be able to handle that device's file type and usually others as well. If you purchase a third-party transcription software product make sure it can handle, at a minimum, DSS, WAV, WMA, and MP3 files, without conversion.

Additional Hardware

A "foot control" or "pedal" to efficiently control digital PC playback without removing hands from the keyboard is an essential tool for the transcriptionist. The foot control is typically a USB-connected device. Controls used with older non-PC tape-based dictation systems will not work with PC-based digital playback products.

Olympus, Sony, and Philips all make USB-connected foot controls, as do other manufacturers.

Digital Audio Hardware and Software: the Short Answer

- Olympus is the dominant manufacturer
- Any Olympus recorder that saves DSS files will work fine
- DSS Player software from Olympus handles handheld to PC transfers using USB
- DSS Player also can handle playback on any PC
- A USB-connected foot control is an essential accessory

Section Six - Useful Web Links and Phone Numbers

Olympus Digital Voice Recorders

http://www.olympusamerica.com/cpg_section/cpg_vr_digitalrecorders.asp

Olympus Free DSS Player Lite

http://www.olympus-europa.com/consumer/2590_4694.htm

Olympus Technical Support telephone number

1-888-553-4448

Olympus Technical Support and Device Manuals

http://www.olympusamerica.com/cpg_section/cpg_support.asp?id=22

Philips

http://www.dictation.philips.com/

Sony

http://b2b.sony.com/Solutions/subcategory/audio-video/digital-voice-recorders

Section Seven - Dictation and the Internet: Keeping Information Private

HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) and common sense dictate that medical records be kept private, a requirement which is even more important when transmitting dictation voice files and finished medical documents via the internet.

Internet privacy for medical files comes down to two main issues:

- Is the file being transmitted encrypted?
- How is the file being transmitted?

Internet encryption is most often achieved using SSL (Secure Sockets Layer) a method of encrypting web transactions. SSL is used, for example, when web sites process credit card transactions.

If a file is being transferred using an SSL connection, it cannot be intercepted and read (or listened to) while traveling between a PC and a web server.

Sometimes the size of the key used to encrypt the SSL connection is discussed. While longer keys make it more difficult decipher or "break" an encrypted transmission, in general you can trust any SSL-encrypted connection.

In addition, those connections using some form of local wireless connectivity (e.g. "Wi-Fi") should absolutely be certain that wireless security is in place to secure the connection between the laptop or PC and the wireless router. Use WPA or WPA2 security instead of the older, less secure WEP. This is separate from the security features of the products that move files location to location using the Internet.

How files are being transmitted can have an important impact on privacy concerns.

Email, for example, is almost always not encrypted, making it a poor choice for transmitting confidential files. Even if the digital audio file or finished word processing document is individually encrypted before being attached to an email, privacy can be compromised if information such as patient name is included in the body of the email, or the name of the file itself.

FTP, or "file transfer protocol" transfers present the same problem, unless some form of "secure" ftp is used, which is not automatic.

Web-based file transfers using SSL connections depend on the encryption technology built in to all web browsers. This is the same technology used to keep credit card, online banking, and other financial information private, and as a result is widely available and well supported by most file transfer products. An advanced web technology called WebDAV (often referred to as Web Folders) can also be used along with SSL to make file movement both convenient and secure.

Products and methods that use a "client" program installed on a PC, which in turn communicates with a corresponding "server" program across the Internet, should use either SSL or some other form of encryption.

Internet Privacy, HIPAA, and Encryption: the Short Answer

- Avoid email
- Use web connections or Web Folders set up to use SSL
- Insist that installed programs use encryption

Conclusion

You will discover that the move to digital audio file based transcription processing can be an important step in the development of your business. The many changes may seem overwhelming at first, but the benefits gained by your company and your customers should far outweigh the costs in time and money involved in making the change from Tape to Digital.

Please feel free to contact us at the numbers listed on the cover of this document if you have any questions on this guide, or if you feel that we may be of some help to you as you transition to digital audio file processing.